

# Internal displacement in Nigeria: an urgent challenge

by Claudia McGoldrick

*In the past five years an estimated 800,000 people have been displaced in Africa's most populous state. Addressing Nigeria's neglected IDP crisis must be a key priority in the run-up to the country's 2007 presidential elections.*

With a population of over 130 million and more than 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria has a multitude of religious, ethnic and political fault lines that periodically lead to communal violence. At least 10,000 have died since military rule ended in 1999. The past year has witnessed an alarming upsurge in the level of violence in the central Nigerian Plateau state and the oil-producing Niger Delta region.

In the decades which followed the attempted secession of Biafra, Nigeria's military rulers forcibly kept the lid on religious, ethnic and political tensions. However, the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 allowed Nigerians greater freedom to vent pent-up grievances and new areas of conflict were created by competition for political spoils. Communal violence was fuelled by ethnic and religious violence (exacerbated by the introduction of Islamic sharia law in a third of Nigeria's 36 states), land disputes and competition for oil resources.

Perhaps the most significant cause of communal violence in Nigeria is the entrenched division throughout the country between people considered indigenous to an area and those regarded as settlers. Settlers may have lived in an area for centuries but are, nevertheless, discriminated against and denied equal access to land, commercial opportunities, employment and education.

In the predominantly Christian Plateau state, the majority of 'settlers' belong to the northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, nomads who have moved southwards as the expanding Sahara desert has dried up their traditional grazing lands. Hausa-Fulani Muslims have long complained that Christian farmers steal their cattle and prevent them from graz-

ing, whilst the farmers counter that cattle encroach on their land. In addition, there are indigenous Muslim ethnic groups fiercely opposed to the perceived expansionist tendencies of the Hausa-Fulanis.

Between February and May 2004 a vicious cycle of revenge attacks in Plateau state left more than 1,000 people dead. Some sources put the number of people displaced in the state at over a quarter of a million but statistics are notoriously unreliable and are much disputed. In the small town of Yelwa, where a series of clashes culminated in the massacre of at least 600 Muslims (according to the Nigerian Red Cross) by heavily armed Christian militia, an estimated 80% of houses were destroyed. Mass graves attest to heavy losses on both sides. While both Muslim and Christian groups in the Yelwa area have made inflammatory accusations, the conflict is not simply driven by religious rivalry. Some Plateau residents remain convinced that the state government deliberately initiated the violence in order to rid the area of Muslim settlers while others believe the state governor has been made a scapegoat.

Conflict in Nigeria is driven by poverty and unequal access to resources. Despite its oil wealth, at least two-thirds of Nigerians live on less than \$1 a day. Many people believe that conflicts are created and fanned by scheming politicians, particularly elites of the former military regime, who rely on the huge pools of destitute and frustrated youths to create social division. When violence erupts, it quickly spreads and takes on a momentum of its own.

## Neglected long-term needs

While immediate humanitarian needs in the wake of communal violence

are often adequately addressed by local authorities, UN agencies, Red Cross/Crescent and NGOs, the longer-term needs of IDPs are routinely neglected.

During the 2004 Plateau crisis most of those who fled the violence became hidden in host communities. The most visible IDPs were the 60,000 or so who took refuge in camps in neighbouring Bauchi and Nassarawa states. Early assessments by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) revealed that the IDPs in camps were in difficult circumstances and many of their basic longer-term needs were unaddressed - including a clear need for trauma counselling. Many people had seen family members badly mutilated and killed, or had themselves been seriously wounded. Hundreds of women and girls had been abducted and many had been raped and used as slave labour. IDPs, including large numbers of children, show clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.

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Almost a year after the Yelwa violence reached its peak, several thousand IDPs remain in camps. Some IDPs have integrated into local communities, joined relatives in other states or are being officially resettled. Although thousands have returned to Plateau to try to pick up the pieces among the rubble and charred remains of their homes, few have the means to start rebuilding. Lack of shelter is a major obstacle to return. Once again, in the aftermath of displacement crises, government assistance is spasmodic and UN support for IDPs has been *ad hoc*.

At the level of the federal government the humanitarian response is constrained by lack of experience in dealing with IDP issues and by competing mandates. Due to competition for resources between the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the National Commission for Refugees (NCR) it is unclear who has prime responsibility

for assisting IDPs. In the wake of the 2004 Plateau state crisis, international donors criticised the Nigerian authorities for lack of coordination, absence of a proper IDP registration system, inefficient use of resources, poor planning, inadequate monitoring and evaluation and the politicisation of humanitarian assistance.

Although the Nigerian government has requested international assistance, very little has been forthcoming as most donors feel Nigeria has the financial resources to tackle problems on its own. Neither the UN nor international donors regarded the displacement of a quarter of a million people in Plateau State as a real humanitarian crisis. An assessment mission led by the European Commission's Humanitarian Office in July 2004 concluded that the crisis was too small in terms of duration, numbers of affected populations and mortality rates to warrant provision of emergency funding to the Nigerian government. There is a widely held view that the government should focus its efforts on addressing the root causes of the problem – including the equitable distribution of resources – rather than simply addressing the symptoms.

### What needs to be done?

Although internal displacement in Nigeria may not amount to an

'emergency' – especially when compared to other conflict-induced displacement crises in West Africa – there is real potential for renewed violence and major population movements. A six-month state of emergency in Plateau state imposed by President Obasanjo was lifted in November 2004 but many fear a further outbreak of violence will again spread to other areas of the country.

The fragmented response to the 2004 crisis has demonstrated the need for improved coordination between humanitarian actors at all stages of internal displacement from contingency planning and preparedness right through to post-emergency rehabilitation activities. Although the Nigerian government may have the financial capacity to respond to emergencies, it lacks the necessary institutional capacity and expertise to deal effectively with acute situations of internal displacement.

Donors must invest both in improving the emergency response and facilitating IDP return and reintegration. This should include not only physical rehabilitation of homes, public buildings and infrastructure but also support for peace and reconciliation initiatives, especially at the grass-roots level. All too often in Nigeria, once an outbreak of

conflict has died down, humanitarian assistance dries up. The situation of IDPs trying to rebuild their homes and livelihoods in the devastated town of Yelwa is just one example of the sad lack of sustained post-emergency humanitarian assistance. MSF is the only NGO working there but it clearly has limited capacity and

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resources to deal with the full range of humanitarian needs. UNICEF is also constrained by lack of funding. Sustained, coordinated support is essential to allow IDPs to return home in 'safety and dignity' as required by the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

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*Billboard in Plateau state.*

